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ABSTRACT

An approach to generating enthusiasm for writing through a writing contest is described in this brief article. AUTHOR'S COMMENT (excerpt): Why would a librarian sponsor a writing contest for more than eleven hundred students in an elementary school? I wanted to provide a writing experience for my students that would be a positive one; I hoped to generate enthusiasm for writing. A contest seemed an appropriate vehicle for involving the entire student body while providing a purpose for writing. PROCEDURES (excerpt): I began with "The Red Balloon," a film wth no dialogue or narration. Students viewed the film and were allowed two weeks to complete entries that included poems, short stories, or essays expressing any themes or experiences of the film. Entries were judged on the qualities of appeal and originality. All participants received certificates on Honors Day at the end of the school year. Winners received ribbons on their certificates. The second year's contest was handled similarly. I chose "Clown," another film without dialogue or narration, as the stimulator. To assure the student's understanding of the film, especially the significance of the ending, I summarized the story before the viewing. The judging and reward system remained the same. (KC)

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A Writing Contest? Why Bother?

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Level:
Middle and junior high school

Author's Comment:

Why would a librarian sponsor a writing contest for more than eleven hundred students in an elementary school? I don't remember all the reasons. I do remember, however, that two thoughts were uppermost in my mind: firstly, I wanted to provide a writing experience for my students that would be a positive one; secondly, I hoped to generate enthusiasm for writing.

Why a contest? A contest seemed an appropriate vehicle for involving the entire student body while providing students with a purpose for writing. Since it also implies that some students will be winners while others will be losers, I knew that I would need to reward every participant in some way.

Year 1 Procedures

I began the first year with *The Red Ballon,* a film with no dialogue or narration. Students viewed the film and then spent a few minutes in a pre-writing activity. Kindergarten through second grade students brainstormed aloud for words that described their feelings and reactions during and after the film. Students in grades three through six did free writing for three minutes. We also spent some time sharing words, writing them on the board, and adding interesting words to the original lists.

The actual writing took place away from the media center. Students were allowed two weeks to complete entries that included poems, short stories, or essays expressing any themes or experiences of the film. A simple retelling of the story was not acceptable. Drawings could accompany entries but were not necessary. Since errors in spelling, grammar, or handwriting did not jeopardize their chances, I asked teachers to refrain from editing or grading the entries in any way.

Because a first grader obviously could not compete with a sixth grader, I established five categories for judging: kindergarten, first grade, second grade, third and fourth grade, and fifth and sixth grade. Four faculty members and I judged the entries on the quality of appeal and originality, choosing from each category what we considered the best ten. After determining which entries had been chosen at least twice, the judges ranked these again to select the first, second, and third place winners. All participants received certificates on Honors Day at the end of the school year. Winners received ribbons on their certificates.

Year 1 Observations

My overall feelings about the contest were good. Participation was high in grades kindergarten through three; approximately eighty per cent of the students chose to enter. However, only twenty per cent of the students in grades four through six participated.

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Some of the effects of the contest could be observed the next school year. Students began to share their writings with me on a regular basis. I am not sure whether they actually were writing more or merely felt safer about sharing with me things they had been writing all along. I do know that I read more short stories, plays, and poems the year after the contest than I had read during the total of three prior to it. I also observed that the contest had been an experience positive enough to make students want to do it again. Early in the year they began to ask if and when we would have another contest, which I readily agreed to sponsor.

Year 2 Procedures

The second year's contest was handled similarly to the first but I made a few changes in an effort to improve it. I chose *Clown*, another film without dialogue or narration, as the stimulator. To assure the students' understanding of the film, especially the significance of the ending, I summarized the story before the viewing.

I also changed the pre-writing activity. I provided story paper and pencils for the younger students and asked them to draw a picture before we brainstormed. They were not bound to this original picture but they could use it if they chose. In addition to the free writing activity with the older students, I led a discussion of possible themes they might like to explore and offered five or six sentence starters.

The judging and reward system remained the same.

Year 2 Observations

Participation in grades kindergarten through three remained high and remained low in grades five through six. However, participation in grade four increased from twenty per cent the first year to almost sixty per cent the second. Had the experience in the contest as third graders been positive enough to motivate them to participate again as fourth graders? The possibility is exciting enough to insure my sponsorship of another contest the next school year.

I made other observations. Fewer students attempted to retell the story. The quality of the entries was improved enough to suggest that perhaps the changes in the pre-writing activity had been beneficial.

I can only speculate about the effectiveness of the contest but I am certain of the rewards to me. I am continuously excited and exhilarated by the creative ability of children and by their freedom in sharing their creativity in song, dance, oral stories, and now in writing. Why bother? What better way than a writing contest to capture some of that creativity in a concrete and permanent form?